

Flu Deaths Continue to Rise in Delaware; DPH Reminds Residents to Protect Themselves

DOVER (March 1, 2019) – Although the overall number of laboratory-confirmed flu cases in Delaware this flu season remains lower than the total number of cases reported at the same time last year, the number of flu-related deaths has continued to increase during the 2018-2019 flu season.

As of February 16, 2019, the most recent date for which data is available, the Division of Public Health (DPH) has confirmed 3,264 flu cases in Delaware during the 2018-2019 season, down significantly from the 2017-2018 season when there were 5,758 confirmed flu cases reported by that time last year. However, DPH has been notified of 16 flu-related deaths so far this season, currently making it the third highest season for flu-related fatalities in the last decade. There were 35 flu-related deaths reported during the 2017-2018 season and 28 during the 2014-2015 season. The most recent death, which occurred this week, involved a 90-year-old Sussex County man who was infected with Influenza A and had multiple underlying health conditions. All 16 of the individuals who passed away this flu season were infected with influenza A and all had underlying health conditions or suspected health complications. The individuals have ranged in age from 41 to 90 years old. Four were New Castle County residents, six were Kent County residents, and six were Sussex County residents. Nine of the individuals were women and seven were men.

The risk for flu-related deaths is greatly increased in the very young, older individuals, and those of any age who have underlying health conditions. DPH continues to remind the public that there are steps they can take to prevent the

spread of the flu. It is important for older individuals with underlying health conditions not only to be vaccinated, but also to limit contact with anyone who may be sick with influenza, and to contact their health care provider as soon as they become ill. Also, family, friends, and caregivers of older individuals with underlying health conditions should be vaccinated and arrange for alternative care, if possible, if they become sick with influenza.

DPH also recommends that individuals with chronic diseases monitor and manage their conditions, as non-compliance with physician's recommendations can increase the risk for infection and complications. This includes maintaining appointments with their health care provider, taking medications as prescribed, and following diet and exercise recommendations from their doctor. Additionally, individuals who smoke and who are ready to stop using tobacco are encouraged to call the Delaware Quitline at 1-866-409-1858.

"We express our condolences to the family and friends of those who have passed away due to flu complications," said DPH Director Dr. Karyl Rattay. "The high number of flu deaths in Delaware is a somber reminder of how serious the flu can be and that we must take all precautions to protect ourselves and our community from this terrible disease. The flu is expected to continue circulating for several more weeks, therefore, we strongly encourage everyone to continue practicing important preventive measures to fight the flu, including getting a flu vaccine if you have not yet done so." While it may seem late in the flu season to some, flu germs can spread well into the summer months. The flu vaccine takes up to two weeks to take full effect, so anyone who has not yet received the vaccine should make an effort to get one as soon as possible.

In addition, DPH encourages Delawareans to take everyday steps to prevent the spread of the flu:

- Practice social distancing if you have cold or flu-like symptoms.

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- Cover sneezes and coughs with a tissue, and dispose of tissues immediately; if no tissue is available, sneeze or cough into your inner elbow.
- Take medications as prescribed.

Social distancing means that those sick with the flu should stay home from work, school, and other gatherings and not return until they have been free of fever – with a temperature of less than 100 degrees F (37.8 degrees C) without the use of fever-reducing medications for at least 24 hours. They should avoid close contact with well people in the household, and stay well-hydrated by drinking plenty of water and other clear liquids. Over-the-counter medicines can provide symptom relief, but if you suspect you have influenza, call your doctor as he or she may decide to provide antiviral medications to help hasten recovery and prevent serious complications. This is particularly important for those who feel very sick, are pregnant or have chronic medical conditions. Unlike colds, which develop gradually, flu symptoms come on suddenly, and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headaches and body aches, chills and fatigue. Some people get complications including pneumonia, bronchitis and sinus and ear infections. People with pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes and asthma are more susceptible to catching the flu.

Flu vaccines are still available at State Service Centers, primary care providers and specialists, pharmacies, and some grocery stores. To find participating stores, enter your zip code in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) flu vaccine finder at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>. For more information about the flu, visit flu.delaware.gov/ or call DPH at 1-800-282-8672. The CDC recommends use of any licensed, age-appropriate influenza vaccine, including inactivated influenza vaccine [IIV], recombinant influenza vaccine [RIV], or live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV). If you have

questions about which vaccine is best for you, talk to your doctor or other health care professional.

Flu shots are still available at DPH clinics located within the State Service Centers:

- Porter State Service Center, 509 W. Eighth St., Wilmington. For all ages 9 and up. Walk-ins are welcome Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to noon and from 1:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- Hudson State Service Center, 501 Ogletown Road, Newark. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-283-7587 (choose Option 2) to make an appointment Monday through Friday.
- Williams State Service Center, 805 River Road, Dover. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-857-5140 to make an appointment Monday through Thursday, 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
- Milford State Service Center – Riverwalk, 253 N.E. Front St., Milford. For ages 9 years and older. Call 302-424-7130 to make an appointment on Mondays from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. and Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
- Anna C. Shipley State Service Center, 350 Virginia Ave., Seaford. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Walk-ins welcome Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. For information, call 302-628-6772.
- Adams State Service Center, 544 S. Bedford St., Georgetown. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-515-3220 to make an appointment on Thursdays from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

For more information about flu surveillance in Delaware, read the weekly flu report at dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/influenzawkly.html.

A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY

availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

Delaware Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency, and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.